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PERCEIVED STRESS IN PARENTS AND PARTNERS
OF PEOPLE WITH HEAD INJURY

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University

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1992

ABSTRACT

The stress experienced by Parents and Partners of people with head injury has been examined by several authors, especially in relation to a number of clinical issues. There is general agreement between researchers and clinicians alike that relatives of people with head injuries experience heightened stress as a result of the injury and its consequences. The present study sought to examine the stress experienced by Parents and Partners of people with head injury by focussing on minor events, along with several related variables. A single structured interview, including both verbally administered and written response questionnaires was completed with 18 Parents and 13 Partners. Measures included the Daily Hassles and Uplifts Scale, the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule, questions regarding Role Change, Health Problems and the Information received at the time of hospitalisation. The combined Parents and Partners group indicated that they experienced moderate levels of Stress and Role Change. A relatively small proportion of participants reported experiencing Health Problems. Partners indicated a slightly higher degree of Stress and a greater degree of Role Change than Parents, and a larger proportion of Partners indicated the presence of Health Problems. Qualitative differences between the two groups were found in terms of sources of Stress. There was little quantitative or qualitative difference in Social Support. Positive correlations were found between Stress and Role Change and Stress and Health Problems. Participants indicated that, in general, the information received at the time of hospitalisation was not satisfactory. Their level of understanding and the perception of the adequacy of this information increased over time. The results obtained supported a number of the research hypotheses in showing that some differences do exist between the two groups, although generally these differences were not large. A number of suggestions for future research and service provision arose from the results obtained.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of people I would like to thank for their assistance and support in the preparation of this thesis. First of all, my supervisors, Cheryl Woolley and Janet Leathem, for their support, guidance and understanding, throughout what has been a very long process.

My thanks must also go to the participants in the study, and their families, who shared with me some of their experiences, and allowed me a small measure of understanding.

John Spicer was very helpful, and gave me valuable advice regarding analysis issues. The Office Staff of the Psychology Department and the Psychology Clinic Secretary were always helpful.

Special thanks to my family for their support, Mum especially. My flatmates, Ange and Steve, have been my friends through the whole process, and I have valued their support and encouragement also.

Thanks also to my employers and my co-workers for their patience and help in allowing me time from work.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of the present research is to examine and describe aspects of perceived stress experienced by a group of parents and partners of people with head injury. The aim is to determine whether qualitative and quantitative differences in perceived stress exist between these two groups. Role Changes, Social Support, Health Problems and Coping will also be examined.

The wider purpose of the present study is to contribute to the body of knowledge that is accumulating about the effects of head injury on relatives of people with head injuries. In addition, it aims to improve the quality of therapeutic interventions that are used to help this group of people by providing information about some of their needs and strengths.

The direction of the present study was prompted, in part, by the areas identified by Cannon (1989) as needing more research. The most relevant of these was the vulnerability of different types of family relationships to stress following head injury. The equivocality and scarcity of the literature concerned with this area, as outlined in Chapter 2, also provided motivation for the direction of the present research.

Scope

The present study is a cross-sectional study, with a deep and narrow focus on one particular area in head injury research - the relative vulnerability of parental and partner relationships in response to severe head injury. It also examines some of the factors that may affect this vulnerability.

Because the present study examines a number of variables with relation to the area of focus, it is largely exploratory. Thus there are three general aims inherent in this research. The first is to examine the stress experienced by parents and partners of people with head injury, and variables that may be related to this. The second is to determine whether there are any differences between these two groups in terms of these variables. The third and final aim is to generate hypotheses for future research in this area from the results obtained.

Terminology

The term 'caregiver' is frequently used in literature concerned with people with disabilities, including head injuries. It is used to describe a number of functions and roles played by people who are often family members. The term 'caregiver' has been avoided in the present study because people with head injuries in general, and specifically the people involved in the present study, do not consider themselves to be in need of care per se.

The people interviewed are interchangeably referred to as participants or Parents and Partners groups, either in combination or separately. The term 'client', 'person with head injury' or 'head injured person' is also used to refer to the participants' sons/daughters/partners in preference over any other term.

Organisation

The thesis consists of four major sections - Introduction, Method, Results and Discussion. The Introduction consists of the first four chapters which cover the major areas relevant to this research. Chapter One deals with the purpose and organisation of the present study. Chapter Two reviews the literature concerned with head injury and its effects on the family. Chapter Three deals with theories of

stress and reviews the literature relevant to this study. And Chapter Four is concerned with the research hypotheses and gives a synthesis of the two previous chapters.

The method section is contained in Chapter Five, and the results of the present study are contained in Chapter Six. The discussion of the results and their implications occupies Chapter Seven.